



**S**AMMY MILLER has a big vision for what jazz is and should be. Born in Los Angeles and currently based in New York, the 26-year-old drummer and his five bandmates in Sammy Miller and The Congregation reach back deep into jazz history to conjure a sound rooted in New Orleans, Tin Pan Alley, and ragtime. On their 2017 mixtape, they pair classics like “Maple Leaf Rag” and “Big Rock Candy Mountain” with newly-written originals in the service of what Miller calls “joyful jazz.” I caught up with him in late fall to talk about joyful jazz, his musical origin story, and how he uses music to create community.

**How did you start playing jazz? And why did you pick the drums?**

I’ve been playing music since I was five years old. I grew up playing in a family rock band. My older siblings already played guitar and piano, and I just wanted to do anything. At some point,

my older brother started bringing home Charles Mingus records, and since then, I loved how listening to that music made me feel. I got so excited. I couldn’t understand it—that’s what I loved about it, and I wanted to figure that out.

**Do you feel like you’re getting closer? Is the music you’re doing now your way of figuring it out?**

It’s been a long journey because now I’m trying to figure out how to give people the feeling I got when I was first exposed to jazz, you know? I felt so included on that first Charles Mingus record that I was listening to. I really felt like I was right there in the thick of it. I want people to feel that way. I never want jazz music to feel like it’s something exclusive; I want people to be able to understand. I feel like that’s a big part of what we do as a band, to give people an entrance point. I think the music can be really daunting at times, and it shouldn’t be.

### **What would you say are your influences?**

It's a lot of different sources—we got really interested in the live work that Duke Ellington was doing in the '20s and '30s. It was so funky and so alive. Early Louis Armstrong feels the same way, it felt very infectious and joyful, yet the arrangements have such precision. The pioneers of jazz music from the 1920s/30s—Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson—have had the biggest impact on us. And I love a lot of those drummers—Zutty Singleton, and the way that Cozy Cole plays. They all come from theater and Vaudeville backgrounds so they all know how to put on a show, even if it's just like playing brushes on a snare drum. The other thing is that we wanted to try to write a lot of our own music, which has happened more and more. Study that stuff, learn from it, and then write our own repertoire.

### **How did those influences affect the song selection on your recent mixtape?**

With the mixtape, we wanted to make something the way old jazz bands did way back in the day. We gave ourselves four hours to cut a record. We wanted to play Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll, like I mentioned, and some folk songs pulling from the larger American canon that has always been interesting to me—the types of songs that you hear jazz bands play, string bands play, bluegrass bands play, and in gospel music. You hear it in all these different genres. I think that repertoire of “genre-less” songs is really interesting.

### **You sing a fair amount on the record. What made you decide to do that?**

I want people to see us as naked as possible, and using the human voice is a part of that, as far as giving everything you have that's part of your being. You can't hide behind the human voice. I've always loved that. There are certain emotions and ideas you can't get across just through the instruments alone.

### **Are there certain songwriters that you're trying to emulate in your own writing?**

It's all over. There are certain writers I like, who are able to use a playfulness and a humor while trying to deal with serious things: John Prine, Randy Newman, Ben Folds, or Willie Nelson. It's not always cryptic.

### **You talk a lot about community as part of jazz. How do you think jazz creates community?**

It's not that jazz itself creates community. I think of it as a vehicle. It's that music, especially now, it gives people a reason to not fight. It gives people a reason to experience something together. I think that's so important, and it's actually just so rare. People go to concerts, and they really have reasons to like it or not like it, or have a strong opinion on it. I want to create things that make

people who wouldn't otherwise like me or my politics or whatever just be able to enjoy themselves. That's our responsibility.

### **And jazz just happens to be the medium you've chosen for that?**

Yeah! What we do, we call it “joyful jazz” because we're doing our own thing within it. It's the lineage we come from.

### **What do you mean when you say “joyful jazz”?**

Just this idea that the music should actually bring you joy, make you feel good. There should be a medicinal quality to it. I just want to spell that out for people because we actually are really intentional. We're a functional band. There's actually a function to what we're doing in the culture, and we see that. There's just service that needs to be provided. We go into towns like Chapel Hill to perform with the hope that people come see us, and go home maybe feeling differently about what an evening can feel like: then maybe there's a reason to leave their house instead of staying home to watch Netflix the next time. What can happen in a performance is more powerful.

### **That's interesting. So it's not as much a commentary on jazz as it is a commentary on our culture at large?**

That's a good question. It's both, but I think a lot of the same things that I feel about society, I feel about jazz—which is that it doesn't hurt anyone to bring a spirit of inclusivity to what you do, and to remember that you have responsibilities. You should leave it better than it was when you showed up. A lot of people don't take that time. It's serious business, I think. Joy is serious. I feel like musicians, they sometimes feel a responsibility to other principles but not to the principle of the audience. It's supposed to be a shared experience. That's kind of written into the code of performer and audience.

### **Is there a place for music to challenge people?**

There is a place for music to do a lot of different things, and challenging the audience takes on many forms. There's being intellectually stimulating, which has its place, but I'm interested in challenging people to let their souls lead for a bit: to be vulnerable, and try to tap into their most particular uniqueness. That's where we find our common ground. ■

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